

MAX WHITAKER

Is Jesus
Athene or Odysseus?

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe*

Mohr Siebeck

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Max Whitaker

Is Jesus Athene or Odysseus?

Investigating the Unrecognisability
and Metamorphosis of Jesus in his Post-Resurrection
Appearances

Mohr Siebeck

Max Whitaker, born 1975; 1995 BSc, 1997 MSc in mathematics from Waikato University; 1997–2005 working as statistician and computer programmer; 2009 BTheol from Otago University; 2016 PhD from Otago University; currently Priest in the parish of North Dunedin, in the Anglican Diocese of Dunedin, New Zealand.
orcid.org/0000-0001-8842-223X

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Sawyers Bay, September 2019

Max Whitaker

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Chapter 1

Once Upon a Time

1.1 Introduction and outline

Introduction to the question

In the canonical Gospel accounts of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, Jesus often appears for the first time in an unrecognised form. This is clearest in the Gospels of Luke and John, but is also hinted at in Matthew, and the long ending of Mark.¹ One explanation for the unrecognisability is that Jesus has undergone a metamorphosis into another form.² The theme of Jesus not being recognised continues to be developed in the apocryphal Gospels and Acts, where it is made more explicit, with Jesus appearing as other people, both as characters that would be recognised, such as one of the Apostles, or as a total stranger.

The theme of characters appearing in unrecognised forms to their friends or followers is not a new one, and was utilised many times in Greco-Roman writing, both before and after the stories about Jesus were recorded, for a variety of thematic purposes.

In this book, I will examine two types of stories in classical literature where characters appear in unrecognised forms. In the first type of story, the hero of the story appears in disguise to his friends and followers, often after a long absence or after the hero was thought to be dead. In the second type of story, gods or other supernatural beings, appear in disguise to help the hero of the story – for example as a messenger, or by providing direct assistance. I will also examine a related class of metamorphosis stories where the character physically changes form into another shape, possibly for the purpose of disguise, and will investigate the concept of metamorphosis as a whole in the ancient world, including the metamorphosis of inanimate objects.

I will then investigate how these literary themes and devices appear in stories about Jesus' appearances to his disciples after his death and resurrection. The approach will be an analysis of the narrative; any questions about the historicity of the canonical or apocryphal works are outside the scope of this study.

¹ What is almost certainly the oldest original text of Mark ends at 16:8 and so does not contain any post-resurrection appearances. This issue will be discussed in Chapter Six.

² This possible explanation will be examined in Chapters Six and Seven.

There are three interlinking approaches with which I will investigate the unrecognisability stories, which will be outlined in this chapter. The first is an analysis of the role the unrecognisable character plays in the story. The second is an analysis of the type of stories in which characters who take those roles appear in disguise. The third is an analysis of the manner in which knowledge is gained or transferred between characters in each of these types of stories. The purpose of these methods is to identify criteria which differentiate between the different types of stories under investigation.

By looking at a number of examples, criteria for distinguishing what I have called “disguised hero” stories, and “disguised god” stories will be created. Each of these sets of criteria will have two aspects. The first aspect is the structure of the story and the sequence of events common to a particular type of story. The second aspect is the purpose of the story in the wider narrative. From these sets of criteria some heuristics will be created to categorise stories into different groups. The final aim is to show that stories about Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances where he is unrecognised can be grouped into two types of stories.

The title of this book refers to a pair of archetypical examples of these types of stories, and the two sorts of characters with which the book will deal. Throughout this study the characters of Athene and Odysseus will be used as examples of the disguised hero and the disguised god, although many other examples will also be examined. By analysing Greco-Roman literature it will be demonstrated that quite distinct disguised character story types can be identified.

The stories about Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances will be compared to each of these story types. The central question of the book could therefore be phrased thus: In the various accounts of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances in the canonical and apocryphal Gospels and Acts, does Jesus most resemble Athene or Odysseus?

I will argue that, when Jesus is the main character, or the hero, of the story, the story is written as a disguised hero story. In other stories, where the main character of a story is no longer Jesus, but is instead one of the Apostles, Jesus is no longer the hero, but is rather presented as a disguised god. The answer that emerges to the question of whether Jesus is presented as a disguised god or a disguised hero is that it depends on the role Jesus is playing, the relationship he has with his disciples, and what purpose the story plays in the wider narrative.

In the canonical Gospel accounts Jesus appears as either a disguised hero or a disguised god, depending on the purpose of the particular passage. However, in the apocryphal Gospels and Acts the theme of the disguised hero vanishes and the theme of the disguised god is much more common. As well as this, in the apocryphal works sometimes the metamorphosis is used for a purpose other

than disguise, and in these cases metamorphosis is used to communicate something about Jesus' nature, rather than about his relationship with his disciples, or to develop the plot in a particular manner.

In terms of the title of the book: Jesus is presented in a narrative context as Odysseus or Athene depending on the purpose of the narrative. I will argue that the reason for this, although it may also be indicative of the author's theological views, is that the character role of Jesus, and so the way he is presented, fits in with narrative conventions. This does not necessarily imply that the author considered Jesus to resemble one of the characters more than the other, although it does not rule this out.

This study provides a set of criteria for classifying Jesus' post-resurrection appearance stories into different groups by paying special attention to the way these stories are structured. In this book the argument will be constrained to how the narrative structures influence the way that the figure of Jesus is presented in his post-resurrection appearances. This means that the study will be limited in two major ways.

First, there are other instances of disguise and recognition in the Jesus narratives which occur before his resurrection, most notably the transfiguration. I will address these accounts briefly, but as this would be a complex study in itself I will be limited in the depth I can look into these accounts and how they relate to the post-resurrection disguise-recognition accounts. Second, I will not be presenting an in-depth analysis of the Christological beliefs of each of the writers. This would also be too great a task to cover with any thoroughness. An outline of the book is provided in Section 1.5.

Some examples from literature

Disguise, metamorphosis, unrecognisability, and discovery are ubiquitous literary themes throughout history, and across cultures.³ Whilst undertaking this study, I have found that it is hard to read a book, watch a TV show or film, or even play a video game without these themes being present. Before looking at some classical examples, therefore, some modern instances will be presented which display a range of different types of metamorphosis and unrecognisability, and different reasons for a character being unrecognisable.

In *The Sixth Sense* a troubled young boy who can see ghosts is befriended by a counsellor. Only after the counsellor has helped the boy come to grips with his life does the counsellor recognise his own true nature and realise that he is a ghost himself. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, a Jedi Knight is fighting against an evil warrior. After cutting off the Jedi Knight's arm the warrior reveals that he is in fact his father who had supposedly died many years ago. The

³ Chapter Two will show how these themes are used in folklore, Chapters Three to Five will show how these themes are prevalent in Greco-Roman literature.

Jedi Knight is devastated and must rethink his whole identity, and his relationship to the warrior Darth Vader. In another instance the Jedi Knight is seeking out Yoda, a legendary teacher, but instead finds himself with an annoying imp-like creature. The imp-like creature tests the Jedi Knight, who fails these tests of character, before the imp reveals that he himself is Yoda. In *The Little Mermaid*, both the heroine (a mermaid) and the villain (an anthropomorphic octopus) undergo a form of metamorphosis and take on the form of humans, and thus forms unrecognisable to the handsome Prince. While changing the mermaid into a human, the villain takes her voice, which is in fact the only sign by which the Prince will recognise the heroine. The villain uses this sign of recognition to fool the Prince into marrying her. In the film, *The Ten Commandments*, Moses realises his own identity, as a Hebrew, when he is shown a piece of cloth which was used to wrap him as a baby.⁴ In *Big* a child is metamorphosed into an adult, and is unrecognisable to his closest friend, until he sings a secret song which only he could know.

The number of examples could be multiplied endlessly, but this is enough to show that the themes of metamorphosis and unrecognisability are ones which continue to be popular in modern works of fiction.

However, the existence of these themes in modern literature, although demonstrating the universality of such themes, would be irrelevant if these themes were not present in literature which existed before the stories about Jesus were composed. The following examples illustrate that the same themes were present in ancient literature:

1. Two warriors face off against one another outside the walls of a besieged city. One seeks to flee, but a goddess appears to him in the form of his brother and convinces him to stand his ground. Only when death has come does he realise his brother was never there, and it was a goddess disguised with his brother's form and voice.⁵

2. A goddess appears to help a young man whose father's house is in danger. She appears at the gate as a stranger, unrecognisable as a goddess, and he invites her in, offering her hospitality.⁶ Later she returns in another form⁷ to help plan his quest, then takes the form of the young man himself⁸ to recruit companions. Finally, she journeys with the young man on his ship in disguise before finally vanishing and revealing her true identity.⁹

⁴ This is a creation of the film makers, which expands on the biblical story. As will be seen in Chapter 5, the use of items left with a baby, and then found when the child is grown up, are common signs of recognition in Greek literature.

⁵ Homer, *Il.* 22.226–299.

⁶ Homer, *Od.* 1.105–124.

⁷ Homer, *Od.* 2.267–268.

⁸ Homer, *Od.* 3.383–384.

⁹ Homer, *Od.* 3.371–372.

3. A leader returns to his homeland after years away to find it is threatened by many enemies in his own home. He returns in disguise, metamorphosed into a different shape by a goddess.¹⁰ Despite his disguise his servant recognises him because of his distinctive scar.¹¹

4. After a woman is raped by a god, she abandons her child, leaving with him a distinctive piece of clothing.¹² Years later, the child has grown up and is unrecognisable to her. They become enemies, but tragedy is averted when they recognise one another through the items left with the son as a child, and their relationship is healed.¹³

5. A father sends his son on a quest to collect some money from a relative in a distant land.¹⁴ The angel Raphael arrives to guide him disguised as one of his kindred.¹⁵ Only when the journey is complete, and having given much help, does the travelling companion reveal his true identity as an angel of God.¹⁶

6. An elderly and impoverished couple is visited by two gods disguised as poor men. Unlike their richer neighbours, the elderly couple treat them to an elaborate show of hospitality and in doing so end up saving their own lives.¹⁷

As with the modern instances, these examples display a range of different types of unrecognisability, and different reasons for a character being unrecognisable.

Some examples containing Jesus

In the following examples, I have deliberately stressed the similarity of these stories about Jesus to other unrecognisability stories so that the goals of this study can be seen from the start. In Chapters Six and Seven it will be explained in detail why the stories have been interpreted in this manner:

1. While walking along, dejected after the death of their leader, a man they thought was going to save their people, two people are approached by a stranger on the road. Oddly, although this is the very man they have been talking about and a man they know well, he is unrecognisable to them. He walks with them, talks with them, even about himself, but still they do not recognise him. He does, however, provide some clues about his identity, so that they are primed to recognise him when he provides a sign for them later in the day. The “stranger” tests his followers, acting as though he will continue journeying on alone in the dark, and they respond well, offering the humble and perhaps homeless stranger hospitality. It is at this point that the “stranger” makes a

¹⁰ Homer, *Od.* 13.429–438.

¹¹ Homer, *Od.* 19.375–475 (particularly 19.392; 19.474–475).

¹² Euripides, *Ion* 10–27.

¹³ Euripides, *Ion* 1397–1438.

¹⁴ Tob 4:20–21.

¹⁵ Tob 5:4–6.

¹⁶ Tob 11:11–22 (especially 11:15) .

¹⁷ Ovid, *Metam.* 8.631–720.

distinctive gesture, and the two people suddenly realise who he is. Only now do they realise that the “stranger” was the very leader they had been mourning, and that he has seemingly come back from the dead. Now they must reassess their whole lives in light of this revelation. The people they thought were doomed have hope, the battle they thought was lost is now won, and the relationship with the leader they thought was gone for ever is rekindled. As their lives’ direction is reversed, so also is their physical direction, and they immediately head back the way they have come with their lives changed forever.¹⁸

2. Several of the same leader’s followers have shut themselves up in a room, out of fear of their enemies. The leader appears to them, but in an initially unrecognisable form.¹⁹ The followers do not immediately recognise him. However, after he has shown them some distinctive wounds, they realise who he is. One of the followers was not there at this time and is understandably sceptical. Upon hearing his companions talk about how the leader has returned from the dead, and has proved his identity to them by showing the sign of his wounds, he also insists that he must see the wounds before he will believe this story.²⁰

3. A follower of a new religious movement has been captured in a hostile and foreign city. A divine being appears to a missionary, and commands him to travel across the sea to find and save his devotee. The same divine being appears in an unrecognisable form, disguised as the captain of a ship, and guides the missionary across the sea before magically transporting him to the city. The divine being then appears to the missionary as a small child, and the missionary falls upon the ground and worships him. The divine being continues to aid the missionary on his quest to save his fellow devotee.²¹

The character appearing in an unrecognisable form in all of these stories is Jesus, and all of these stories take place after his death. The purpose of this study is to investigate the similarities between stories such as these, and other post-resurrection stories where Jesus appears in a changed or unrecognisable form, the ways in which they differ from one another, and the ways in which they are similar to unrecognisability stories from other traditions.

¹⁸ Luke 24:13–35.

¹⁹ This is not immediately obvious from reading John 20, but the reasons for this interpretation will be presented in Chapter Seven.

²⁰ John 20:19–29.

²¹ Acts Andr. Mth. 4–17.

1.2 Review of previous studies

This study engages with a wide range of primary sources, from Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian texts.²² As such, a range of biblical, and other, commentaries are used, which will not be listed here.

The narratives studied span different times and cultures, yet have many similarities both thematically and structurally. The works of folklorists address the phenomena of changed or unrecognisable forms from a particular perspective. Stith Thompson created a ground-breaking and still invaluable *Motif Index of Folk-Literature*, which will be used to provide a background for the themes studied in this book.²³ The works of folklorists Propp and Aarne will also serve as a starting point for understanding the narrative structures of stories which exist in multiple cultures. Aarne's *The Types of the Folk-Tale*²⁴ provides a classification system for tale types, and Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*²⁵ attempts to identify the underlying narrative structure of folktales by separating the stories into their component parts. These works will be used mostly in Chapter Two.

The themes of metamorphosis and disguise will be central to this study. Richard Buxton provides a comprehensive analysis of a range of Greek metamorphosis stories, addressing the issue of how seriously the Greeks took metamorphosis stories, and what their purpose was, in *The Forms of Astonishment*.²⁶ He shows that metamorphosis was used for a diverse number of reasons, such as for love, escape, or deception. He argues that all gods could undergo metamorphosis, and also points out similarities between Greco-Roman culture and other traditions, including modern films and literature. Similarly, the specific area of gods appearing in other forms has been addressed by Rose in *Divine Disguisings*.²⁷

The literary purpose of metamorphosis stories in Greek mythology is investigated in Forbes Irving's *Metamorphosis in Greek Myths*.²⁸ He summarises a number of stories, and shows that metamorphosis stories appear in a range of

²² Including Homer, Tragedy, Greek and Roman comedy, Old Testament passages, other Jewish writings, the canonical Gospels, and the Apocryphal Gospels and Acts. The works containing Jesus are examined in Chapters Six and Seven, and those containing other characters in Chapters Four and Five.

²³ Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, 6 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955).

²⁴ Antti Aarne, *The Types of the Folk-Tale*, trans. Stith Thompson (New York: Franklin, 1928).

²⁵ Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

²⁶ R. G. A Buxton, *Forms of Astonishment: Greek Myths of Metamorphosis* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁷ H. J. Rose, "Divine Disguisings," *HTR* 49 (1956): 63–72.

²⁸ Paul M. C. Forbes Irving, *Metamorphosis in Greek Myths* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990).

literary genres. He also shows that a vast range of different sorts of metamorphosis take place in Greek literature. His focus is on the way metamorphosis is used in stories,²⁹ rather than an attempt at explaining metamorphosis as derived from a “myth and ritual” theory.³⁰ He concludes his book with a catalogue of metamorphosis stories.

This present study investigates the unrecognisability of Jesus in his post-resurrection appearances in the canonical and apocryphal Gospels and Acts. It also describes the way unrecognisable Jesus stories differ within and between these different works. As such, a range of previous studies which investigate unrecognisability and metamorphosis in both canonical and apocryphal works will be useful.

These works attempt to make sense of why Jesus is presented as unrecognisable, or in a different form, and these will be examined now. The literature vital for this specific question can be broken down into two approaches. The first approach investigates the Jesus stories as metamorphosis stories, seeing the metamorphosis as the attribute of primary interest. The main focus is on the apocryphal Gospels and Acts, but this involves showing how these themes also existed in and developed from the canonical Gospels. The second approach investigates the Jesus stories as disguise/recognition stories, and sees the recognition of Jesus’ identity as the attribute of primary interest. Both of these methods have their strengths and their limitations and these will be outlined briefly below, and discussed in more detail in later chapters.

Jesus as a metamorphic being

Papers written about Jesus as a metamorphic or polymorphic being compare the way Jesus is described, in both his pre- and post-resurrection appearances, to the descriptions of other metamorphic characters from surrounding cultures.

Pieter J. Lalleman investigates the polymorphous appearances of Christ in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, and argues that the instances of metamorphosis of Jesus in the New Testament, coupled with a worldview which underemphasised the value of mortal life, could lead to the development of stories about the polymorphy of Christ, without it being necessary to assume that there was an influence of gnostic or docetic viewpoints.³¹

Paul Foster also investigates metamorphic and polymorphic appearances of Jesus. He concludes that polymorphy is compatible with both “orthodox” and

²⁹ He states that his “approach is rather to suppose that the myths are primarily stories, and that the imaginative and emotional response they evoke is not something to be distinguished from their narrative function but a central part of it,” *ibid.*, 6.

³⁰ These explanations are examined and rejected. See *ibid.*, 38–57.

³¹ P. J Lalleman, “Polymorphy of Christ”, in *The Apocryphal Acts of John*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer, SAAA 1 (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995), 97–118.

docetic Christologies, where polymorphy may be used as a tool to demonstrate the transformation of the world, as well as the rejection of the world.³²

Both of these authors are concerned primarily with the Christological or Theological ideas which may have influenced metamorphosis and polymorphy stories. These approaches highlight and help to clarify how metamorphic beings were portrayed in ancient literature, and assess which Christological views are compatible with a metamorphic or polymorphic Jesus. However, they do not differentiate between the character types undergoing metamorphosis, that is, whether it is a god or a hero. They do not therefore attempt to explain why a metamorphic being is being used from a narrative viewpoint, which is my aim in this book.

Jesus stories as recognition scenes

The recognition scene, and its importance in plot development, has been analysed at least since Aristotle's *Poetics*. The terms he used to describe recognition and its impact on plots are still used today.³³ A number of scholars have concentrated on the theme of recognition: B. Perrin analyses recognition scenes in a range of Greek literature;³⁴ Sheila Murnaghan explores the motifs of disguise and recognition in the *Odyssey*, drawing attention to the themes of social recognition and hospitality;³⁵ Peter Gainsford presents a formal analysis of recognition scenes specifically in the *Odyssey*, which he breaks into "motifs" and "moves". Some of this analysis is applicable only to the *Odyssey*, but other aspects are applicable to a wider range of recognition scenes.³⁶ Terence Cave has explored how recognition scenes have been used in a much broader range of literature, and across different genres, from antiquity up to the twentieth century, showing that these scenes are very common in literature.³⁷

Several scholars have analysed biblical passages through the recognition-scene lens. Liv Inglebord Lied investigates how the recognition motif is used in 2 Bar 50:1–1:6.³⁸ This book is limited to investigating the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus as recognition scenes. However, several scholars have seen the Gospel as a whole as a recognition plot, as people Jesus encounters

³² Paul Foster, "Polymorphic Christology: Its Origins and Development in Early Christianity," *JTS* 58 (2007): 66–99.

³³ Chapter Four will introduce and discuss these terms.

³⁴ B. Perrin, "Recognition Scenes in Greek Literature," *AJP* 30 (1909): 371–404.

³⁵ Sheila Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

³⁶ Peter Gainsford, "Formal Analysis of Recognition Scenes in the 'Odyssey'," *JHS* 123 (2003): 41–59.

³⁷ Terence Cave, *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).

³⁸ Liv Inglebord Lied, "Recognising the Righteous Remnant? Resurrection, Recognition, and Eschatological Reversals in 2 Baruch 47–52," in *Metamorphoses: Resurrection, Body and Transformative Practices in Early Christianity*, ed. Turid Karlsen Seim and Jorunn Økland (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 311–36.

are challenged to recognise his true identity. Thus, in these previous studies, it is either the social status³⁹ of Jesus which is in need of recognition, rather than his identity (as the man Jesus), or it is the *Logos* which is in need of recognition, rather than the man from Nazareth.⁴⁰

Friedrich Gustav Lang sees a moment of both *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia*⁴¹ in Mark 8:27ff.⁴² This is the moment when the disciples recognise Jesus' social status, which changes the way they relate to him, and (as vs. 31 indicates) the future direction of the plot. Craig T. McMahan compares the recognition scene in Luke 24 to the recognition of Odysseus. He sees three recognition scenes in Luke 24 (Luke 24:1–12; 13–35; 36–53), and concludes that they follow the pattern of a Homeric recognition scene.⁴³

Kasper Bro Larsen investigates how recognition scenes are used in the Gospel of John, showing similarities with Homer and other Greek literature.⁴⁴ Hitchcock identifies four recognition scenes in the Gospel of John, two before Jesus' resurrection, and two after his resurrection, but only sees the passages *after* the resurrection as genuine recognition scenes.⁴⁵ R. Alan Culpepper takes a broader approach, and sees *anagnorisis* as a motif which occurs throughout John's Gospel and sees the Gospel as "a series of episodes that describe attempted, failed, and occasionally successful *anagnorisis*."⁴⁶ Culpepper sees the

³⁹ The phrase "social status" covers a wide range of situations: the societal position (King, Messiah, etc.); relationships to people (father, master, slave, brother, etc.); and in the context of stories involving non-human persons the ontological status of the person (an angel, god, etc.).

⁴⁰ There are, then, two ways to look at the disguised figure of Jesus in the Gospel accounts. The sort of disguise *before* the resurrection, and the sort of disguise *after* the resurrection. Before his resurrection people know that he is "Jesus" but are unaware of his social status. So when Jesus asks his disciples who the people think he is (Mark 8:27; Luke 9:18; Matt 16:13), the answer he is looking for is one of his social status (i.e. "this is the Messiah"), not his identity (i.e. "this is Jesus"). Oddly, the crowds actually try to answer in terms of Jesus' identity, thinking perhaps he is John the Baptist, or perhaps Elijah (in disguise?), thus giving an answer in terms of Jesus' identity. Simon Peter, on the other hand, says "the Messiah" giving an answer in terms of Jesus' social status. In the passages I am looking at it is the "Jesus" part of his identity which is in need of recognition (although the recognition of this may also lead to a recognition of his social status as well).

⁴¹ These Aristotelian terms will be discussed below (in Section 1.4.3, and then in more detail in Chapter Four).

⁴² Friedrich Gustav Lang, "Kompositionsanalyse des Markusevangeliums," *ZTK* 74 (1977): 1–24.

⁴³ Craig T. McMahan, "More than Meets the 'I': Recognition Scenes in *The Odyssey* and Luke 24," *PRSt* 35 (2008): 87–107.

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